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INDEPENDENCE

Rectorial Address delivered at
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BY

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INDEPENDENCE

THE sole revenge that Maturity can take upon Youth for the sin of being young, is to preach at it. When I was young I sat and suffered under that dispensation. Now that I am older I purpose, if you, my constituents, will permit me, to hand on the Sacred Torch of Boredom.

In the First Volume, then, of the Picking Edition of the works of the late Robert Burns, on the 171st page, you will find this stanza :

To catch Dame Fortune's golden smile,
Assiduous wait upon her,
And gather gear by every wile
That's justified by honour—

Not for to hide it in a hedge,
 Nor for a train attendant,
 But for the glorious privilege
 Of being independent.

At first sight it may seem superfluous to speak of thrift and independence to men of your race, and in a University that produced Duncan of Ruthwell and Chalmers. I admit it. No man carries coals to Newcastle—to sell; but if he wishes to discuss coal in the abstract, as the Deacon of Dumfries discussed love, he will find Newcastle knows something about it. And so, too, with you here. May I take it that you, for the most part, come, as I did, from households conversant with a certain strictness—let us call it a decent and wary economy—in domestic matters, which has taught us to look at both sides of the family shilling; that we belong to stock where present sacrifice for future ends (our own education may have been among them) was accepted, in principle and prac-

tice, as part of life? I ask this, because talking to people who for any cause have been denied these experiences is like trying to tell a neutral of our life between 1914 and 1918.

Independence means, "Let every her-
ring hang by its own head." It signifies
the blessed state of hanging on to as few
persons and things as possible; and it leads
up to the singular privilege of a man
owning himself.

The desire for independence has been,
up to the present, an ineradicable human
instinct, antedating even the social in-
stinct. Let us trace it back to its begin-
nings, so that we may not be surprised at
our own virtue to-day.

Science tells us that Man did not begin
life on the ground, but lived first among
tree - tops — a platform which does not
offer much room for large or democratic
assemblies. Here he had to keep his
individual balance on the branches, under

penalty of death or disablement if he lost it, and here, when his few wants were satisfied, he had time to realise slowly that he was not altogether like the beasts, but a person apart, and therefore lonely. Not till he abandoned his family-tree, and associated himself with his fellows on the flat, for predatory or homicidal purposes, did he sacrifice his personal independence of action, or cut into his large leisure of brooding abstraction necessary for the discovery of his relations to his world. This is the period in our Revered Ancestor's progress through Time that strikes me as immensely the most interesting and important.

No one knows how long it took to divide the human line of ascent from that of the larger apes ; but during that cleavage there may have been an epoch when Man lay under the affliction of something very like human thought before he could have reached the relief of speech. It is indeed

conceivable that in that long inarticulate agony he may have traversed—dumb—the full round of personal experience and emotion. And when, at last, speech was born, what was the first practical use Man made of it? Remember, he was, by that time, past-master in all arts of camouflage known to the beasts. He could hide near a water-hole, and catch them as they came down to drink—which is the germ of war. He could attract them by imitating their cries of distress or love—which is the genesis of most of the arts. He could double back on his tracks and thus circumvent an acquaintance of his own kind who was stalking him—which is obviously the origin of most of our social amenities. In short, he could *act*, to admiration, any kind of lie then extant. I submit, therefore, that the first use Man made of his new power of expression was to *tell* a lie—a frigid and calculated lie.

Imagine the wonder and delight of the

First Liar in the World when he found that the first lie overwhelmingly outdid every effect of his old mud - and - grass camouflages with no expenditure of energy ! Conceive his pride, his awestricken admiration of himself, when he saw that, by mere word of mouth, he could send his simpler companions shinning up trees in search of fruit which he knew was not there, and when they descended, empty and angry, he could persuade them that they, and not he, were in fault, and could despatch them hopefully up another tree ! Can you blame the Creature for thinking himself a god ? The only thing that kept him within bounds must have been the discovery that this miracle-working was not confined to himself.

Unfortunately—most unfortunately—we have no record of the meeting of the World's First Liar with the World's Second Liar ; but from what we know of their descendants to-day, they were probably of

opposite sexes, married at once, and begat a numerous progeny. For there is no doubt that Mankind suffered much and early from this same vice of lying. One sees that in the enormous value attached by the most primitive civilizations to the practice of telling the Truth; and the extravagant praise awarded, mostly after death, to individuals notorious for the practice.

Now the amount of Truth open to Mankind has always been limited. Substantially, it comes to no more than the axiom quoted by the Fool in *Twelfth Night*, on the authority of the witty Hermit of Prague, "That that is, is." Conversely, "That that is not, isn't." But it is just this Truth which Man most bitterly resents being brought to his notice. He will do, suffer, and permit anything rather than acknowledge it. He desires that the waters which he has digged and canalized should run uphill by themselves when it

suits him. He desires that the numerals which he has himself counted on his fingers and christened "two and two" should make three and five according to his varying needs or moods. Why does he want this? Because, subconsciously, he still scales himself against his age-old companions, the beasts, who can only act lies. Man knows that, at any moment, he can tell a lie which, for a while, will delay or divert the workings of cause and effect. Being an animal who is still learning to reason, he does not yet understand why with a little more, or a little louder, lying he should not be able permanently to break the chain of that law of cause and effect—the Justice without the Mercy—which he hates, and to have everything both ways in every relation of his life.

In other words, we want to be independent of facts, and the younger we are, the more intolerant are we of those who tell us that this is impossible. When

I wished to claim my independence and to express myself according to the latest lights of my age (for there were lights even then), it was disheartening to be told that I could not expect to be clothed, fed, taught, amused, and comforted—not to say preached at—by others, and at the same time to practise towards them a savage and thorny independence.

I imagine that you, perhaps, may have assisted at domestic conferences on these lines ; but I maintain that we are not the unthinking asses that our elders called us. Our self-expression may have been a trifle crude, but the instinct that prompted it was that primal instinct of independence which antedates the social one, and makes the young at times a little difficult. It comes down from the dumb and dreadful epoch when all that Man knew was that he was himself, and not another, and therefore the loneliest of created beings ; and *you* know that

there is no loneliness to equal the loneliness of youth at war with its surroundings in a world that does not care.

I can give you no great comfort in your war, but, if you will allow me, I will give you a scientific parallel that may bear on the situation.

Not once upon a time, but at many different times in different places and ages, it came over some one Primitive Man that he desired, above everything, to escape for a while from the sight and sound and the smell of his Tribe. It may have been an excellent Tribe, or it may have been an abominable one, but whichever it was he had had enough of it for a time. Knowing no more than the psychology of his age (whereas we, of course, know the psychology of all the ages), he referred his impulse to the direct orders, guidance, or leading of his Totem, his Guardian Spirit, his Disembodied Ancestor, or other Private God, who had

appeared to him in a dream and inspired his action.

Herein our ancestor was as logical as a man taking his Degree on the eve of a professional career—not to say as practical as a Scot. He accepted Spirits and Manifestations of all kinds as part of his highly organized life, which had its roots in the immemorial past; but, outside that, the amount of truth open to him was limited. He only knew that if he did not provide himself with rations in advance, for his proposed excursion away from the Tribe, he would surely starve.

Consequently, he took some pains and practised a certain amount of self-denial to get and prepare these rations. He may have wished to go forth on some utterly useless diversion, such as hacking down a tree or piling up stones, but whatever his object was, he intended to undertake it without the advice, interference, or even the privity of his Tribe.

He might appreciate the dear creatures much better on his return ; he might hatch out wonderful schemes for their advantage during his absence. But that would be a side-issue. The power that possessed him was the desire to own himself for a while, even as his ancestors, whose spirits had, he believed, laid this upon him, had owned themselves, before the Tribal idea had been evolved.

Morally his action was unassailable ; his personal God had dictated it. Materially, his justification for his departure from the normal was the greasy, inconspicuous packet of iron rations on his shoulder, the trouble he had taken to get them, and the extent to which he was prepared not to break into them except as a last resort. For, without that material, backed by those purposes, his visions of his Totem, Spirit, or God would have melted back into the ruck of unstable, unfulfilled dreams ; and his own

weariness of his Tribe would have returned upon himself in barrenness of mind and bitterness of soul.

Because if a man has *not* his rations in advance, for any excursion of any kind that he proposes to himself, he must stay with his Tribe. He may swear at it aloud or under his breath. He may tell himself and his friends what splendid things he would do were he his own master, but as his Tribe goes so must he go—for his belly's sake. When and as it lies, so must he lie. Its people must be his people, and its God must be his God. Some men may accept this dispensation; some may question it. It is to the latter that I would speak.

Remember always that, except for the appliances we make, the rates at which we move ourselves and our possessions through space, and the words which we use, nothing in life changes. The utmost any generation can do is to rebaptize each spiritual or emotional rebirth in its own

tongue. Then it goes to its grave hot and bothered, because no new birth has been vouchsafed for its salvation, or even its relief.

And your generation succeeds to an unpromising and dishevelled heritage. In addition to your own sins, which will be numerous but quite normal, you have to carry the extra handicap of the sins of your fathers. This, it is possible that many of you have already made clear to your immediate circle. But the point you probably omitted (as our generation did, when we used to deliver *our* magnificent, unpublished orations *De Juventute*) is that no shortcomings on the part of others can save us from the consequences of our own shortcomings.

It is also true that you were brought into this world without being consulted. But even this disability, from which, by the way, Adam suffered, though it may justify our adopting a critical attitude

towards First Causes, will not in the long-run nourish our physical or mental needs. There seems, moreover, to be an unscientific objection on the part of First Causes against being enquired of.

For you who follow on the heels of the Great War are affected, as you are bound to be, by a demoralization not unlike that which overtakes a household where there has been long and severe illness, followed by a relaxation of domestic ritual, and accompanied by loud self-pity and large recriminations. Nor is this all your load. The past few years have so immensely quickened and emphasized all means of communication, visible and invisible, in every direction that our world—which is only another name for the Tribe—is not merely “too much with us,” but moves, shouts, and moralizes about our path and our bed, through every hour of our days and nights. Even a normal world might become confusing on these terms; and ours

is far from being normal. One-sixth of its area has passed bodily out of civilization ; and much of the remainder appears to be divided, with no consciousness of sin, between an earnest intention to make Earth Hell as soon as possible, and an equally earnest intention, with no consciousness of presumption, to make it Heaven on or before the same date. But you have ample opportunities of observing this for yourselves.

The broad and immediate result is, partly through a recent necessity for thinking and acting in large masses, partly through the instinct of mankind to draw together and cry out when calamity hits them, and very largely through the quickening of communications, the power of the Tribe over the individual has become more extended, particular, pontifical, and, using the word in both senses, impertinent, than it has been for many generations. Some men accept this omnipresence of crowds ;

some may resent it. It is to the latter that I am speaking.

The independence which was a “glorious privilege” in Robert Burns’s day, is now more difficult to achieve than when one had merely to overcome a few material obstacles, and the rest followed almost automatically. Nowadays, to own oneself in any decent measure, one has to run counter to a gospel, and to fight against its atmosphere; and an atmosphere, as long as it can be kept up, is rather cloying.

Even so, there is no need for the individual who intends to own himself to be too pessimistic. Let us, as our forefathers used, count our blessings.

You, my constituents, enjoy three special ones. First, thanks to the continuity of self-denial on the part of your own forbears, the bulk of you will enter professions and callings in which you will be free men—free to be paid what your

work is worth in the open market, irrespective of your alleged merits or your needs. Free, moreover, to work without physical molestation of yourself or your family as long and as closely as you please—free to exploit your own powers and your own health to the uttermost for your own ends.

Your second blessing is that you carry in your land's history and in your hearts the strongest instinct of inherited continuity, which expresses itself in your passionate interest in your own folk, your own race and all its values. History shows that, from remote ages, the Scots would descend from their heather and associate together on the flat for predatory purposes; these now take the form of raiding the world in all departments of life—and governments. But at intervals your race, more than others, feels the necessity for owning itself. Therefore it returns, in groups, to its heather, where, under camou-

flage of “ games ” and “ gatherings,” it fortifies itself with the rites, incantations, pass-words, raiment, dances, food and drink of its ancestors, and re-initiates itself into its primal individualism. These ceremonies, as the Southern races know to their cost, give its members fresh strength for renewed forays.

And that same strength is your third and chief blessing. I have already touched on the privilege of being broken by birth, custom, precept and example to doing without things. This is where the sons of the small houses who have borne the yoke in their youth hold a cumulative advantage over those who have been accustomed to life with broad margins. Such men can and do accommodate themselves to straitened circumstances at a pinch, and for an object ; but they are as aware of their efforts afterwards as an untrained man is aware of his muscles on the second morning of a walking tour ; and when

they have won through what they consider hardship they are apt to waste good time and place by subconsciously approving, or even remembering, their own efforts. On the other hand, the man who has been used to shaving, let us say, in cold water at seven o'clock the year round, takes what one may call the minor damnabilities of life in his stride, without either making a song about them or writing home about them. And that is the chief reason why the untrained man always has to pay more for the privilege of owning himself than the man trained to the little things. It is the little things, in microbes or morale, that make us, as it is the little things that break us.

Also, men in any walk of life who have been taught not to waste or muddle material under their hand are less given to muddle or mishandle moral, intellectual, and emotional issues than men whose wastage has never been checked, or who

look to have their wastage made good by others. The proof is plain.

Among the generations that have preceded you at this University were men of your own blood—many and many—who did their work on the traditional sack of peasemeal or oatmeal behind the door—weighed out and measured with their own hands against the cravings of their natural appetites.

These were men who intended to own themselves, in obedience to some dream, leading, or word which had come to them. They knew that it would be a hard and long task, so they set about it with their own iron rations on their own backs, and they walked along the sands here to pick up driftwood to keep the fire going in their lodgings.

Now, what in this World, or the next, can the World, or any Tribe in it, do with or to people of this temper? Bribe them by good dinners to take larger views on

life ? They would probably see their hosts under the table first and argue their heads off afterwards. Offer 'em money to shed a conviction or two ? A man doesn't lightly sell what he has paid for with his hide. Stampede them, or coax them, or threaten them into countenancing the issue of false weights and measures ? It is a little hard to liberalize persons who have done their own weighing and measuring with broken teacups by the light of tallow candles. No ! Those thrifty souls must have been a narrow and an anfractuons breed to handle ; but, by their God, in whose Word they walked, they owned themselves ! And their ownership was based upon the truth that if you have not your own rations you must feed out of your Tribe's hands—with all that that implies.

Should any of you care to own yourselves on these lines, your insurances ought to be effected in those first ten years of a

young man's life when he is neither seen nor heard. This is the period—one mostly spends it in lodgings, alone—that corresponds to the time when Man in the making began to realize that he was himself and not another.

The post-war world which discusses so fluently and frankly the universality and cogency of Sex as the dominant factor of life, has adopted a reserved and modest attitude in its handling of the imperious and inevitable details of mere living and working. I will respect that attitude.

The initial payments on the policy of one's independence, then, must be financed, by no means for publication, but as a guarantee of good faith towards oneself, primarily out of the drinks that one does not too continuously take; the maidens in whom one does not too extravagantly rejoice; the entertainments that one does not too systematically attend or conduct; the transportation one does not too

magnificently employ ; the bets one does not too generally place, and the objects of beauty and desire that one does not too generously buy. Secondly, those revenues can be added to by extra work undertaken at hours before or after one's regular work, when one would infinitely rather rest or play. That involves the question of how far you can drive yourself without breaking down, and if you do break down, how soon you can recover and carry on again. This is for you to judge, and to act accordingly.

No one regrets—no one has regretted—more than I that these should be the terms of the policy. It would better suit the spirit of the age if personal independence could be guaranteed for all by some form of co-ordinated action combined with public assistance and so forth. Unfortunately there are still a few things in this world that a man must manage for himself: his own independence is one of

them; and the obscure, repeated shifts and contrivances and abstentions necessary to the manufacture of it are too personal and intimate to expose to the inspection of any Department, however sympathetic.

If you have a temperament that can accommodate itself to cramping your style while you are thus saving, you are lucky. But, any way, you will be more or less uncomfortable until it presently dawns on you that you have put enough by to give you food and housing for, say, one week ahead. It is both sedative and anti-spasmodic—it makes for calm in the individual and forbearance towards the Tribe—to know that you hold even seven days' potential independence in reserve—and owed to no man. One is led on to stretch that painfully extorted time to one month if possible; and as one sees that this is possible, the possibilities grow. Bit by bit, one builds up and digs oneself into a base

whence one can move in any direction, and fall back upon in any need. The need may be merely to sit still and consider, as did our first ancestors, what manner of animal we are; or it may be to cut loose at a minute's notice from a situation which has become intolerable or unworthy; but, whatever it may be, it is one's own need, and the opportunity of meeting it has been made by one's own self.

After all, yourself is the only person you can by no possibility get away from in this life, and, may be, in another. It is worth a little pains and money to do good to him. For it is he, and not our derivatively educated minds or our induced emotions, who preserves in us the undefeated senior instinct of independence. You can test this by promising yourself *not* to do a thing, and noticing the scandalous amount of special pleading that you have to go through with yourself if you break your promise. A man does not always re-

member, or follow up, the great things which he has promised himself or his friends to do ; but he rarely forgets or forgives when he has promised himself *not* to do even a little thing. This is because Man has lived with himself as an individual, vastly longer than he has lived with himself under tribal conditions. Consequently, facts about his noble solitary self and his earliest achievements had time to get well fixed in his memory. He knew he was not altogether one with the beasts. His amazing experiences with his first lie had shown him that he was something of a magician, if not a miracle-worker ; and his first impulse towards self-denial, for ends not immediately in sight, must have been a revelation of himself to himself as stupendous as a belief in a future life, which it was possibly intended to herald. It is only natural, then, that individuals who first practised this apparently insane and

purposeless exercise came later to bulk in the legends of their Tribe as demigods, who went forth and bearded the gods themselves for gifts—for fire, wisdom, or knowledge of the arts.

But one thing that stands outside exaggeration or belittlement—through all changes in shapes of things and the sounds of words—is the bidding, the guidance, that drives a man to own himself and upholds him through his steps on that road. That bidding comes, direct as a beam of light, from that Past when man had grown into his present shape, which Past, could we question it, would probably refer us to a Past immeasurably remoter still, whose Creature, not yet Man, felt within him that it was not well for him to jackal round another brute's kill, even if he went hungry for a while.

It is not such a far cry from that Creature, howling over his empty stomach

in the dark, to the Heir of all the Ages counting over his coppers in front of a cookshop, to see if they will run to a full meal—as some few here have had to do; and the principle is the same: “At any price that I can pay, let me own myself.”

And the price *is* worth paying if you keep what you have bought. For the eternal question still is whether the profit of any concession that a man makes to his Tribe, against the Light that is in him, outweighs or justifies his disregard of that Light. A man may apply his independence to what is called worldly advantage, and discover too late that he laboriously has made himself dependent on a mass of external conditions, for the maintenance of which he has sacrificed himself. So he may be festooned with the whole haberdashery of success, and go to his grave a castaway.

Some men hold that this risk is worth

taking. Others do not. It is to these that I have spoken.

“Let the council of thy own heart stand, for there is no man more faithful unto thee than it. For a man’s mind is sometime wont to show him more than seven watchmen who sit above in a high tower.”



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